


Ed Buck was known for his abrasive sick behavior. But Democrats still took his money

 Ed Buck in court in Los Angeles
Ed Buck in court in Los Angeles.
(Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

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West Hollywood City Councilman John Duran said Ed Buck once hung an effigy of him in a park.

Some municipal employees said they refused to meet alone with him, and he unnerved two political foes so much at council meetings that sheriff's deputies accompanied them to their cars afterward.

Still, for years, Buck was a fixture in West Hollywood, where he donated to all but one of the current City Council members, enmeshed himself in local activist groups and ran, unsuccessfully, [to be a councilman himself](#). In the liberal-leaning city, he took on popular causes like historic preservation and [animal rights](#), which gave him more cachet.

Buck was tolerated more than beloved, said some of those who took his money while looking past his caustic behavior.

That attitude has become the subject of much consternation in West Hollywood and local Democratic circles after [he was federally charged](#) in connection with the overdose deaths of two black men in his West Hollywood apartment.

Buck's political influence has drawn [intense criticism](#), especially from black and LGBTQ activists who believe his status as a white Democratic donor initially insulated him from prosecution and that influential people made excuses for a man whose volatility was on public display for years.

Jasmyne Cannick, a black political consultant who pushed for Buck's prosecution, said she believed Buck got special treatment because of his fundraising for local Democratic candidates, a charge officials have denied.

"It's more than race and class," [Cannick said](#) after the second death in Buck's home in January. "It is also political. This is a man protected by the Democratic Party."

Buck's attorney, Seymour Amster, has declined repeated requests for comment. Buck has [pleaded not guilty](#) to the federal drug charges.

A Times analysis of campaign finance records shows that, since the mid-2000s, Buck has given more than \$500,000 to political candidates and causes, almost all of them linked to the Democratic Party.


Forty politicians currently holding office in California have received donations from Buck, including Gov. Gavin Newsom, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, L.A. County Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey and U.S. Reps. Ted Lieu and Adam B. Schiff. Some politicians [have returned the money](#).

 [ed-buck-donations-share-image.jpg](#)

[All the California officeholders who took money from Ed Buck](#)

Former West Hollywood Councilman Steve Martin said people feel more comfortable criticizing Buck since his arrest, but that he finds it “interesting that everybody’s anxious to say they are no longer his friend” because “obviously a lot of people were friends with him.”

“I think it’s kind of horrifying for people to think this is somebody you knew, you might have worked with, you might have gone to dinner with or gone over to his apartment, to think he’s capable of these things,” said Martin, who worked closely with Buck on anti-development campaigns.

 Democratic donor Ed Buck, left, Hernan Molina and West Hollywood Councilman John Duran in West Hollywood in 2010.

Ed Buck, left, former West Hollywood City Council aide Hernan Molina and West Hollywood City Councilman John Duran at a candlelight vigil in 2010.

(Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

Prosecutors allege Buck, 65, preyed on vulnerable gay black men who were homeless, addicted to drugs or working as escorts and lured them to his spartan Laurel Avenue apartment, where he manipulated them into doing drugs for his sexual gratification.

Several men claimed Buck injected them with methamphetamine as they slept, according to the federal complaint.

Buck has been federally charged with providing the meth that led to the deaths of Gemmel Moore, 26, in 2017, and Timothy Dean, 55, in January. Prosecutors say [a third black man](#) nearly died of an overdose in Buck's home last month. The Los Angeles County district attorney charged Buck with [battery and operating a drug den](#).

Duran said Buck hung the effigy in West Hollywood Park in 2005 and created a website called DumpDuran.com that declared the politician "sold out to developers" with digitally altered images of Duran's face that had exaggerated bags under his eyes.

Back then, Buck was among a group of preservationists fighting to save [a 1915 Colonial-style estate](#) nicknamed Tara for its resemblance to the plantation home in "Gone With the Wind," and Duran had become the target of Buck's wrath over his vote to turn the home into a senior living complex.

"He was extremely volatile, angry, irrational, mean, a bully, all those things. He was a real cyclone in the city," Duran said. "We were not friends."

But by 2011, Buck and Duran had become allies, championing a local ban on the sale of fur apparel and other causes. Over the next five years, Duran accepted at least \$12,500 in donations from Buck for his City Council reelection campaign and his failed bid for the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, state and local records show.

“That’s what happens in politics,” Duran said. “You often end up rubbing elbows with somebody that, maybe in previous campaigns, you were mortal enemies with.”

Duran went on to work as an attorney for Buck, a role for which he [has been sharply criticized](#) but that he said was limited to discussing real estate issues. He said he occasionally discussed his own sobriety with Buck.

“Ed is not a bad person. He’s a drug addict,” Duran said. “Sadly, this is what drug addiction looks like: Irrational thinking and compulsive behavior and anger and volatility and mental health challenges. ... I don’t think it’s an excuse. I think it’s an explanation.”

Multiple people who currently or formerly worked at City Hall told The Times they refused to meet alone with Buck. At public meetings, he would rail against political foes in colorful and sometimes crass language.

“He would walk into a room, and you could read people’s body language. People would just tense up,” said one former city employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity after years of confrontations with Buck. “He wasn’t there to say something nice. Most people aren’t; they have an ax to grind. But the way he did it, this kind of Machiavellian way.”

After council meetings, Buck stood in the parking lot, staring into the former employee’s car, the person said.

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Two people told The Times that sheriff's deputies attending City Council meetings at which Buck was present accompanied them to their vehicles afterward out of concern for their safety.

"As we walked out, he would corner me before I could even leave the lobby ... He'd be poking his finger in my chest," said one political adversary who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation. Sheriff's deputies, the person said, witnessed Buck's behavior and "said it would be best for me to make sure I was accompanied going to the parking lot."

Capt. Michael Hannemann, a spokesman for the Sheriff's Department, said the department could not corroborate the claims.

Buck donated to each of the current City Council members except Mayor Pro Tem Lindsey Horvath.

 People carry boxes of petitions across a street
LaTisha Nixon, center, mother of Gemmel Moore,
attempts to deliver 30,000 signed petitions to Los
Angeles County Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey in February 2019.
(Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Questions remain about the source of his wealth. Los Angeles County prosecutors asking a judge to set bond for Buck at \$4 million [wrote in a bail motion](#) that he is not employed, "has no known source of income," and might be funding "his lifestyle of preying on vulnerable men" with narcotics trafficking.

In the 1980s, Buck was a well-known figure in Arizona, where he led the effort to recall Arizona Gov. Evan Mecham, who eventually was impeached. Then a Republican, Buck was known for his bombastic actions, like hanging [a piñata effigy of the governor](#) and feuding with a black Arizona State Capitol police chief [whom he called a “baboon.”](#)

By the early 2000s, Buck had relocated to West Hollywood, where he became involved with the Save Tara group.

Allegra Allison, who spearheaded the effort, said he was good at mobilizing volunteers, ran phone banks in his apartment and spent hours walking precincts. Buck told her he had given money to neighbors who were being evicted, she said. He rescued golden retrievers and doted on his dogs. Allison thought that, while prickly, Buck had good intentions.

But she said she was disturbed by some of his aggressive tactics, like creating the DumpDuran website, and by his behavior at some activist meetings where he thought he was in charge and did not listen to people who disagreed with him. By the time the Tara issue was winding down in 2011, when the City Council [decided to preserve](#) the Laurel Avenue estate, Allison suspected Buck was using drugs. He would disappear for days, then show up at her door with the skin on his face appearing picked, she said.

Court records show that Buck has been the subject of [several requests for restraining orders](#) in Southern California.

In 2011, Buck threw his support behind Mayor John D’Amico, who was running for City Council for the first time, pledging to

support a first-in-the-nation ban on the sale of fur apparel that Buck was championing.

Buck organized a volunteer campaign [called Fur Free WeHo](#) that canvassed the city on D'Amico's behalf and packed City Council meetings to press the issue.

For that campaign, Buck gave D'Amico \$500, the local maximum individual election contribution, and claimed that the fur campaign got D'Amico elected. He gave him an additional \$500 for his reelection campaign, city and state records show.

D'Amico told The Times that Buck's alleged criminal behavior was "not part of the person I knew nine years ago" and that they drifted apart after the 2011 election.

"It's just terribly, terribly dark and terribly sad, and I can't explain it," he said of the allegations.

Genevieve Morrill, president of the West Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, was one of the most vocal [opponents of the fur ban](#). She said the Chamber worked with the Fur Information Council of America, a fur industry trade group, on an economic impact study that showed the ban would affect around 90 stores, while Buck publicly claimed it only would affect a handful. When he showed up at her office one day, Morrill asked him where he got his numbers.

"He said, 'I pulled it out of my ass,'" Morrill said.

 Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey and U.S. Attorney Nicola Hanna

Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey, left, and Nicola Hanna, the U.S. attorney in Los Angeles, announce in September that charges have been filed against Ed Buck.

(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

After the fur ban passed, Buck threw his support behind the 2013 council reelections of Duran and Los Angeles County Assessor Jeffrey Prang, a former West Hollywood councilman, who voted for it. From 2008 to 2018, Prang received \$11,950 from Buck for various campaigns, records show.

Prang said he knew that Buck was “inclined to be a flamethrower” but maintained a cordial relationship with him. The county assessor, [whose office was accused this month](#) of giving special tax treatment as a quid pro quo for campaign contributions, said he did not consider Buck a major donor. (The allegations against the county assessor’s office do not involve Buck.)

“There are friendships, and there are political friendships that really involve civic and political association,” Prang said. “I think Ed fit that category for a lot of people.”

Prang and D’Amico are listed as [“humane heroes”](#) on the website for Animal PAC, a political action committee for which Buck once was the top donor.

Animal PAC formed in 2011 and was terminated in 2014, according to state records. Another group called Animal PAC formed in 2016 under a different state identification number and is a separate entity, said Tony Hale, the organization’s executive director. Buck continued to donate.

In 2013, Buck cut a \$250,000 check to Animal PAC. Hale said he essentially gave the PAC a loan to try to influence others to give big donations, "but then, apparently, no one did and he took it back." State records show Buck received a refund of nearly \$225,000.

Hale said Animal PAC "just wants to disassociate ourselves with him" and that "in the animal community, this was an atomic bomb."

Animal rights activists said they had feared for Buck's safety because they thought homeless and drug-addicted men would take advantage of him, Hale said.

"There was word among the activists in the animal community that knew Ed that he had helped a lot of homeless, especially gay men," Hale said.

Hale, a California Democratic Party Executive Board member, said many people gave Buck the benefit of the doubt after Moore's death. But doubts surfaced after Dean's death and the overdose of a man in his apartment last month, he said.

"Now, I don't know what to believe," Hale said. "It's one of those things where lightning strikes twice, then three times. What do you say? It just seemed like a tragic accident, then with the second one, it seemed to be much more of a problem."

Earlier this year, Buck, a former steering committee member for the Stonewall Democratic Club, an LGBTQ organization, tried to rejoin the club, which also has sought to distance itself from him.

At the club's request, Buck [resigned in 2017](#) after Moore's death. After the district attorney's office in July 2018 announced that it [would not be charging Buck](#) in Moore's death, he began calling Stonewall officers, saying he had been exonerated and wanted to come back, said Lester Aponte, the club's president.

On Jan. 5, the club was holding its annual holiday party at the V Wine Room in West Hollywood. Buck came to the door, but board members told him to leave, Aponte said.

"We were incredulous that he seemed completely oblivious to the damage he has done. ... There was no question in our mind that we didn't want to see him at our party," Aponte said.

Two days after the party, [Dean died](#) in Buck's apartment.

Times researcher Maloy Moore and staff writer Richard Winton contributed to this report.